



## **Helping Others a Phone Call at a Time**

By Mary Buswell

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Montana as well as the rest of the nation watched the devastation unfold. Many of us sent money, donated blood, and wished we could do more.

Montana's Unemployment Insurance Division did do more. In the first week after the hurricane, we sent an offer to help the Louisiana Department of Labor get the victims' unemployment claims filed. We knew that literally hundreds of thousands of folks were in need, and unemployment benefits are a first line of assistance in disasters. On September 6, the offer was made, and by September 8<sup>th</sup>, staff had been trained, additional phones had been installed and up to 35 Montana UI staff began to file claims for 4 hours a day via an Internet connection to the Louisiana system.

"Our unemployed neighbors in Louisiana were really hurting; many lost their homes, lost their jobs, were separated from their families, and had little food or clothing," said UI Administrator Roy Mulvaney. "When Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast Montana UI staff responded with help right away. It was just the right thing to do."

It is said that in times of adversity people pull together. In this case, Hurricane Katrina pulled together a nation. Because the UI system is a national program, numerous states were able to pull together and help out the Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama UI programs by filing claims.

The state of Texas acted as a call clearinghouse for Louisiana calls. Unemployed workers called a toll free number in Texas and calls were distributed to staff in Montana, California, Washington, Utah, Michigan, Georgia, Colorado, Rhode Island, Arizona and Texas. Using the Louisiana Internet claims filing application, UI Division staff answered the phones and processed Louisiana UI claims for 8 weeks. Other states helped out Mississippi and Alabama, who also were devastated first by Hurricane Katrina and then Hurricane Rita.

Louisiana callers could not believe people in Montana were filing their claims. It was a culture shock for people on both ends of the phone. Montanans think Louisiana residents have an accent, but discovered that Montanans also "talked funny", and way too fast. Some callers weren't sure exactly where Montana was, but still responded with "Thank God for you and your help". In many instances, our claimtakers were the first help anyone had received after the disaster. Talking to a live person who could maybe offer some assistance (sometimes just a friendly ear) was overwhelming for some people. During the phone calls, we heard stories from people who had been relocated to shelters with literally the clothes on their back, people who had

been separated from family members and had no idea if they would ever see them again, and people who saw more death and destruction than most will ever see in a lifetime.

Staff from our Billings and Helena Claims Processing Centers, our Benefits Bureau, Tax Bureau and Program Support Bureau all took time away from their normal jobs to take claims. It truly was a division-wide effort to help. And people who weren't taking calls stepped in to pick up the work of their co-workers. We were so fortunate that Montana's UI claim workload allowed staff to respond to the call for help and that so many rolled up their sleeves and helped.

Montana claimants also played a very helpful role. They were asked to either call the Claims Processing Centers from 11:30 to 4:30 each day, or to file their claims over the Montana Internet site at UI4U. Callers were very patient and understanding when they called the Claims Processing Centers before 11:30 and heard the recorded message that Montana staff was helping victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and to please either call back or file on the Internet. Because Montana claimants can file their claim through the Internet 24 hours a day, service was not adversely impacted and during the first 2 weeks of our Katrina effort, Internet claim usage doubled.

Over the 8 weeks that Montana assisted Louisiana, we filed 6,012 Louisiana claims and took another 6,803 calls to answer questions or provide information. During that same time, we also filed 6,663 Montana claims and answered 9,580 calls from Montana claimants and employers. Louisiana had over 300,000 unemployment claims filed as a result of the disaster, more than a year's claim load in normal times.